

Messengers of Satan

One of the most debated, misunderstood and misapplied passages of scripture in the Bible is found in a small passage of only 3 verses

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 – For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me *to be* or hears from me. ⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, **a thorn in the flesh** was given to me, **a messenger of Satan** to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. ⁸ Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. ⁹ And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Introduction:

- For generations, Bible commentators have offered countless theories as to what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was. The most popular range from various and sundry illnesses (malaria, epilepsy, ophthalmia, etc.) to haunting guilt for persecuting the church to a sexual addiction that Paul never got victory over.

The “sure” Word of prophecy:

And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation. [2 Peter 1:19,20 NAS]

- We can't have a "**sure word**" about the meaning of Scripture (or anything else) unless we have a sure **method** to interpret the words.
- Since the Bible teaches that God is not the author of **confusion** [1 Cor. 14:33], how can the many disagreements today between Christians and the proliferation of the cults be explained since all, or nearly all, claim to use the Bible as the basis of their doctrines? Nearly all false doctrines taught today by Christians and cultists alike can be traced to the distortion of the **meaning** of Biblical words.
- "When two interpretations are claimed for a Scripture, the construction most in **agreement** with all the facts of the case should be adopted. When all the facts of an interpretation are in agreement they sound together in harmony, like notes in a chord.

- Biblical interpretation is more than knowing a set of rules, but it cannot be done without the rules. So, learn the rules, and rightly apply them...." (*Divorce & Remarriage*, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1967)

Eight rules for interpretation:

1. **The rule of DEFINITION:** What does the word mean? Any study of Scripture must begin with a study of words. Define your terms and then keep to the terms defined. The interpreter should conscientiously abide by the plain meaning of the words. This quite often may require using a Hebrew/English or Greek/English lexicon in order to make sure that the sense of the English translation is understood. A couple of good examples of this are the Greek words "allos" and "heteros". Both are usually translated as "another" in English - yet "allos" literally means "another of the same type" and "heteros" means "another of a different type."
2. **The rule of USAGE:** It must be remembered that the Old Testament was written originally by, to and for Jews. The words and idioms must have been intelligible to them - just as the words of Christ when talking to them must have been. The majority of the New Testament likewise was written in a milieu of Greco-Roman (and to a lesser extent Jewish) culture and it is important to not impose our modern usage into our interpretation. It is not worth much to interpret a great many phrases and histories if one's interpretations are shaded by pre-conceived notions and cultural biases, thereby rendering an inaccurate and ineffectual lesson.
3. **The rule of CONTEXT:** The meaning must be gathered from the context. Every word you read must be understood in the light of the words that come before and after it. Many passages will not be understood at all, or understood incorrectly, without the help afforded by the context. A good example of this is the Mormon practice of using 1 Cor. 8:5b: "...for there be gods many and lords many..." as a "proof text" of their doctrine of polytheism. However, a simple reading of the whole verse in the context of the whole chapter (e.g. where Paul calls these gods "so-called"), plainly demonstrates that Paul is not teaching polytheism.
4. **The rule of HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:** The interpreter must have some awareness of the life and society of the times in which the Scripture was written. The spiritual principle will be timeless but often can't be properly appreciated without some knowledge of the background. If the interpreter can have in his mind what the writer had in his mind when he wrote - without adding any excess baggage from the interpreter's own culture or society - then the true thought of the Scripture can be captured resulting in an accurate interpretation. Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Our only interest in the past is for the light it throws upon the present."
5. **The rule of LOGIC:** Interpretation is merely logical reasoning. When interpreting Scripture, the use of reason is everywhere to be assumed. Does the interpretation make

sense? The Bible was given to us in the form of human language and therefore appeals to human reason - it invites investigation. It is to be interpreted as we would any other volume: applying the laws of language and grammatical analysis. As Bernard Ramm said:

"What is the control we use to weed out false theological speculation? Certainly the control is logic and evidence... interpreters who have not had the sharpening experience of logic... may have improper notions of implication and evidence. Too frequently such a person uses a basis of appeal that is a notorious violation of the laws of logic and evidence." (Protestant Biblical Interpretation, Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956)

6. **The rule of PRECEDENT**: We must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another for which there is no precedent. Just as a judge's chief occupation is the *study of previous cases*, so must the interpreter use *precedents* in order to determine whether they really support an alleged doctrine. Consider the Bereans in Acts 17:10-12 who were called "noble" because they searched the Scriptures to determine if what Paul taught them was true.
7. **The rule of UNITY**: The parts of Scripture being interpreted must be construed with reference to the significance of the whole. An interpretation must be consistent with the rest of Scripture. An excellent example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. No single passage teaches it, but it is consistent with the teaching of the whole of Scripture (e.g. the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are referred to individually as God; yet the Scriptures elsewhere teach there is only one God).
8. **The rule of INFERENCE**: An inference is a fact reasonably implied from another fact. It is a logical consequence. It derives a conclusion from a given fact or premise. It is the deduction of one proposition from another proposition. Such inferential facts or propositions are sufficiently binding when their truth is established by competent and satisfactory evidence. Competent evidence means such evidence as the nature of the thing to be proved admits. Satisfactory evidence means that amount of proof which would ordinarily satisfy an unprejudiced mind beyond a reasonable doubt. Jesus used this rule when he proved the resurrection of the dead to the unbelieving Sadducees in Matt. 22:23-33.

Interpretive rules and 2 Corinthians 12:7-11

1. The expression *thorn in the flesh* is not used in **one single** instance in the Bible as a figure of **sickness**. Every time that the expression *thorn in the flesh* is used its meaning is stated plainly.
2. First mentions and **patterns** of *thorn in the flesh*

- Numbers 33:55 - But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain *shall be* irritants in your eyes and **thorns in your sides**, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell.
 - Speaking of the Canaanites as thorns in Israel's side. Moses told Israel before they entered the promised land to drive out the Canaanites or this would be the result
- Joshua 23:13 - know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides **and thorns in your eyes**, until you perish from this good land which the Lord your God has given you.
 - Again he is speaking of the heathen nations; not sore eyes.
- 2 Samuel 23:6 – But *the sons* of rebellion *shall all be as thorns thrust away*, Because they cannot be taken with hands.
 - Some of the last words of David; again speaking of heathen nations.

Notice, in every single instance this is speaking of enemies of God's people. They are personalities

The messenger of Satan

Paul states that his *thorn in the flesh* was the messenger of **Satan** This Greek word *angelos* is mentioned 188 times in the Bible and is translated *angel* 181 times, 7 times as *messenger* In all 188 times it is a **person** not a **thing**. Paul states what this *angel* came to do *To buffet me – buffet* means **blow after blow**.

If Paul's thorn were sickness it would then be saying multiple diseases or the same disease repeating itself.

- Weymouth – *Satan's angel dealing blow after blow*

Paul's idea of *buffeting* has nothing to do with sickness

- 1 Corinthians 4:11-13 – Here buffeting has nothing to do with sickness, but persecution.
- Again, the law of *first mention* comes into play here

The Christian Response:

1. Bless and Don't Curse

Romans 12:14 (ESV) - Bless those who persecute you; **bless and do not curse them.**

2. Follow the Golden Rule

Luke 6:27-31 (ESV) - But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, **do good to those who hate you**, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. ³¹ **And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.** (THE GOLDEN RULE)

3. Be Faithful

These were not just religious rhetoric, empty or pompous words from Christ – He lived it out!

Luke 23:34 (ESV) - And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, **for they know not what they do.**” And they cast lots to divide his garments.

- In His dying moments, Christ interceded on behalf of those who crucified Him.